

Future of fire in the Applegate

BY TERRY FAIRBANKS

On a forested ridge above Williams, Oregon, the Rogue Forest Restoration Partnership (RFRP), for which I serve as coordinator, met last month to review areas needing fuels reduction. We heard the local Bureau of Land Management fire manager, Trevor Wallace, describe how, by linking ridge treatments and maintaining them, managers gain advantages in protecting the community from future wildfire. We talked about nearby treated areas that burned in the 2018 wildfires, where firefighters could directly fight the fire's spread because of low flames, less spotting, and lower hazard even getting to the fire.

Living in the Applegate, many of us worry each summer about the risk of uncontrolled fires in our forests, farmland, and communities. How do we reduce fire risks while also protecting the values we cherish—the forests, trees, rivers, and wildlife? Is it possible that we could learn to live with fire and not feel so threatened? Can we feel confident that wildfires will be controlled safely by our local firefighters? Can we increase the areas that are ready for prescribed fires to further reduce risks?

RFRP is advancing an active restoration approach to forest health and fire-risk reduction, taking a middle road between no-touch conservation and clear-cutting. The partnership promotes fuel reduction, ecologically guided forest thinning, and prescribed burning, all of which

respect the forest values that we all care about while reducing the threat of severe wildfire to wildlife, rivers, and communities. And RFRP wants to engage you in the conversation about how to make it happen.

Of course, it's expensive, but RFRP recently secured a commitment of \$6 million through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to treat 4,090 acres and demonstrate what we mean. Fuel reduction and thinning are being planned for federal and private lands to both restore habitat and reduce fire risk in priority locations around the Rogue

Valley, including in the Applegate. The partnership connects four local nonprofits, two state organizations, and three federal organizations, with each contributing match funding. My job with the Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative (SOFRC) is to coordinate partnership efforts—no small undertaking, but I do get a lot of help!

Part of the initiative is to open a conversation with locals about the work: why it is so important for our safety and sense of well-being, how it is done, and, hopefully, what more we could do.

There is currently not nearly enough funding for all the work needed in the Rogue Valley or the Applegate. However, RFRP, with experience gained in the Ashland Forest Resiliency project

near Ashland, believes that an engaged community can organize to attract needed funding. RFRP was able to justify the OWEB investments with the Rogue Basin Cohesive Forest Restoration Strategy developed by SOFRC. The strategy shows that the Applegate ranks high for risk from wildfire, including the risks to community and wildlife, and for being a place with lasting forest benefits in the face of climate change.

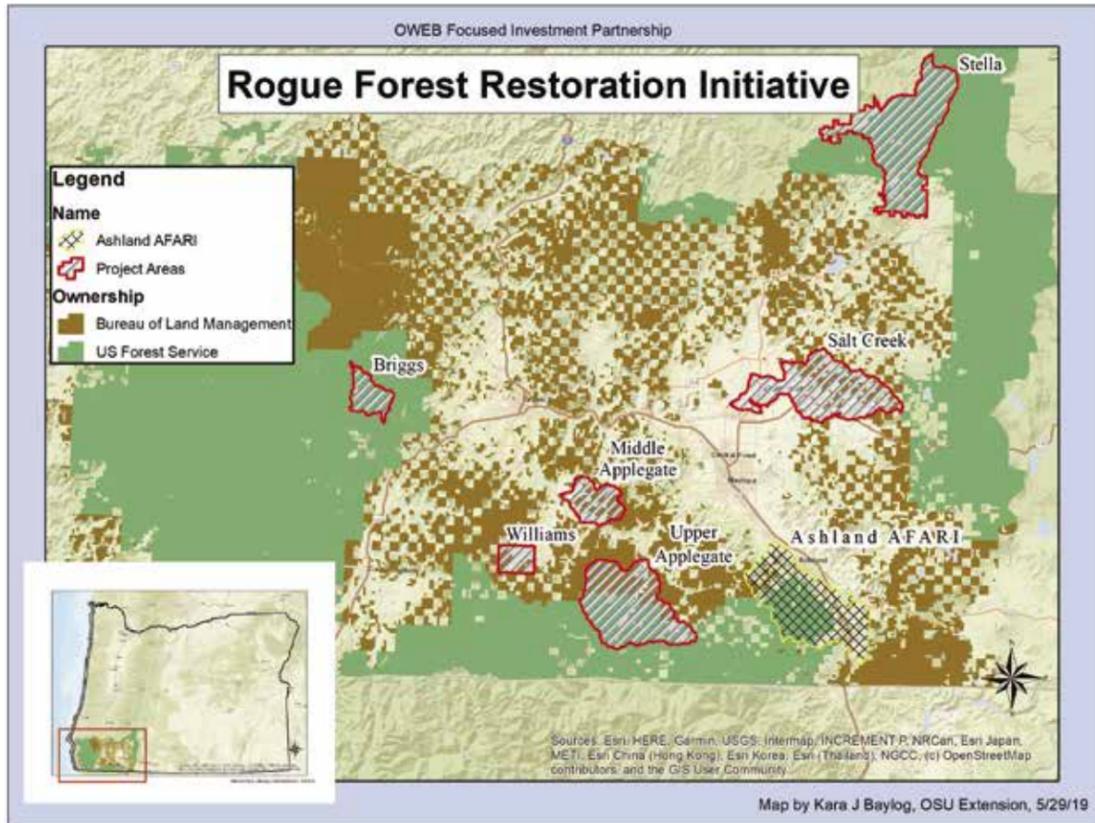
Restoration and fuel-reduction are presently planned on three projects in the Applegate Valley: the US Forest Service Upper Applegate Restoration Project, the Bureau of Land Management Williams Integrated Vegetation Management, and eventually work in the Middle Applegate. The Upper Applegate and Williams projects will start this winter. The Middle Applegate project will start later, after further planning.

Because valley residents care that our forests are healthy, functioning, and able to provide the values we cherish into the future—from large trees that provide habitat, to recreation for our families, to a source of water and products that we can utilize—we stand a great chance of accomplishing what is needed.

Public meeting

RFRP invites the public to a meeting on December 2 at 6 pm at Applegate River Lodge, 15100 Highway 238, when we will share more information and consider questions from the community. Please join us.

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The return of good fire

BY TIMOTHY SEXAUER

This fire season in the Rogue Basin was less smoky than those of recent years, and we've had some breathing room to contemplate our relationship with fire. The increase in devastating megafires has led ecologists, federal and state agencies, firefighting professionals, and landowners to question the way we've been managing fire in the last century. While the situation is complex, and in any scenario we will still be dealing with the threat of big wildfires for years to come, there is a growing understanding that an essential part of moving away from bad fire, and the oppressive smoke that comes with it, is returning more good fire to the landscape.

"Good fire" is a phrase many are using to describe prescribed broadcast burns that increase fire safety and restore ecological health. According to Christina Clemons, Oregon Department of Forestry's (ODF's) smoke management field coordinator, "Experience has taught ODF that prescribed fire is helpful in reducing hazardous fuels and lessening the impacts of future wildfires and smoke. It is important for the public to understand the benefits of prescribed fire such as reducing dangerous fuel buildup, clearing out harmful pathogens, balancing insect populations, and breaking down forest debris that puts nutrients back into the soil, thus feeding plants and trees and creating better browse material for wildlife."

She also explains that controlled fire is also controlled smoke, and that the smoke from a prescribed burn tends to dissipate within hours, if not right away, rather than

the weeks of thick smoke from an out-of-control, high-intensity wildfire.

Jakob Shockey, restoration program manager for the Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council, describes human management of fire as a missing keystone in the ecological process. "In restoration, we are attempting to move beyond 'building habitat' that will eventually fall apart, toward restoring natural processes that will create and maintain habitat for the long haul. Flooding and fire are the two natural processes that drive our ecology in the Applegate, and prior to white settlement, two keystone species—beaver and human—worked in tandem, directing these processes for a more abundant ecosystem."

Jakob is working with some neighbors and firefighting friends to plan controlled burns in their neighborhood of the Applegate, hopefully starting this fall on Jakob's property, helping to restore this social and ecological process.

Merv George, forest supervisor for the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, points out that "fire is a very simple ecological problem and a wicked, complex social problem."

Merv George is also indigenous to the neighboring Klamath Basin, and his people have been managing fire in their territory for millennia. While he entered the forest service to help restore good relations with fire, his responsibility as forest supervisor is also to protect human lives and infrastructure. He explains that, while some wildfires can be ecologically beneficial, he has to put out fires that



The day after a controlled burn, the land is covered in char, which benefits the hydrology, soil biology, and the fire-dependent vegetation that will soon emerge.



Jakob Shockey (left) walks his land with Rick O'Rourke, an experienced Yurok fire practitioner, to discuss a potential burn.

homes and structures and continuing with management up the surrounding slopes.

This management increase in the Applegate and beyond comes from both more controlled burns by fire professionals and community-managed private burns, like those Jakob and others have already done and plan to do. For a community to manage fire, expertise must spread to more people through experience.

Because of the potential danger of fire, private burns must involve experienced fire-management practitioners. We all need to manage our smoke, so when planning a burn we residents should follow the ODF smoke-management rules and guidelines (oregon.gov/ODF/Fire/Pages/Burn.aspx) and get a burn permit, if needed.

If we can all put up with more temporary smoke from good fires in early spring and after the first fall rains, then we can protect our homes in the short term, and, in the long term and at a landscape level, we can better control wildfire again and restore balance to our relationship with fire.

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naturally ignite in the hottest time of summer so that they don't grow to threaten a town later, when resources are thin. He also affirms that restoring regular cycles of good fire to the landscape is key, starting with safety buffers around our